

Preserving Priscilla – A History Of Gay Identity And The Drag Subculture In Sydney.

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By exploring the point of departure from the modern and analysing how over time changing societal attitudes and a postmodern higher comfort factor for celebrating differences has shaped the cultural identity of the GLBT community, we can gain a greater appreciation for both local history, and prevalent historical issues which have shaped and influenced the present moment we live in. The central ideas of postmodernity have allowed for the preservation of 'The Priscilla Show' performed at the Imperial Hotel. This particular social and cultural phenomenon has been kept and revered as a timely drag 'tradition' by the Sydney gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community.

Introduction

Through an examination of postmodernity the following essay will analyse how overtime changing societal attitudes and a higher comfort factor for celebrating differences has shaped the cultural identity of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community. Before examining aspects of GLBT's cultural identity, it is vital to understand the principles at large that have caused the sexual oppression of homosexuals in Australia. Over the past three decades, the social conditions of homosexual minorities in Australia have undergone dramatic changes, particularly with the fight against sexual oppression (Willett, 2000).

These dramatic changes are inextricably linked to the growing prominence of postmodernity and therefore this paper explores the intersections and points of departure between modernity and postmodernity, and how the ideas of postmodernity have informed this particular social and cultural phenomenon. To begin to explore this point of departure modernity must be framed; for the purpose of this discussion modernity is identified with human kind's striving for continual progress. It is this belief of the 'march towards progress', that outlines the underlying metanarrative, which deals with the idea of having only one absolute truth (Malpas, 2005).

One of the difficulties inherent in attempting to place any concept in a historical perspective is that circumstances and terminology change over time and across cultures. This is certainly the case in dealing with the concept of 'homosexuality'. French theorist Michel Foucault details in his History of Sexuality (Geoff, 2000), that sexuality should be viewed as a constructed category of knowledge as it has been constructed over various times. Foucault insists that this is especially true for the category of homosexuality and certainly today's model of heterosexuality is derived from particular contexts (Spargo, 1999). Prior to exploring other concepts in this paper, it must be recognised that there is needs of the class in power. Sexual oppression, sustained by modernity's capitalism, has been a means of reordering and stabilising social relationships in the interests of dominant classes (Morgain, 2005 p129).

Several other notable factors contribute to the oppression of GLBT people prior to modernity. Western civilisation before the Enlightenment era saw the rise of

Christianity and with its advent developed a conservative system replacing the polytheistic practices of the ancient civilisations (Tully, 2000; Geoff, 2000). Attitudes toward what had been acceptable behaviours in the old system, particularly same-sex behaviours, became significantly less tolerated. During this period the Church's influence dominated government and politics, which permitted the Church unprecedented power in influencing and creating canon laws (Geoff, 2000).

Due to the Church's level of power the practices of canon law paralleled the legal development of much of Western civilisation, and consequently both modern civil law and common law bear the influences of canon law (Tully, 2000; Geoff, 2000). Therefore it was here that the Church's condemnation of homosexuality became institutionalised. Even after the Enlightenment reform of government and academic thought, these laws were deeply entrenched as moral codes of conduct. Indeed this attitude of intolerance and disapproval of same-sex practices was transported to the colonies of the New World, and remained generally unchallenged in 19th century Australian society. It was not until the later part of the 20th century, with the emergence of postmodernity, that the metanarrative was challenged.

Postmodernity and rise of the GLBT Liberation movement

The term postmodernity has been used in different eras and in many contexts, but in this discussion postmodernity is to be regarded as an 'attitude' or shift in paradigm. This paradigm shift was characterised by an 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1997 p36) otherwise known as grand narratives that order our understanding of history and knowledge itself. Metanarratives offer a narrative for all narratives, so to speak, by developing a totalising explanation for all stories, thus providing some kind of universal 'truth'. A number of postmodern theorists, Lyotard included, have pointed out that metanarratives have lost their power because they fail to account for that which is incompatible with their schema. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of 'progress', an Enlightenment belief that social progress is necessary. In reaching for progress, as German philosopher GWF Hegel (Gillen & Ghost, 2007 p33) described, we 'therefore progress towards freedom'. Inevitably one can view history as a 'developing process of continually shifting endeavours, to which humanity achieves this freedom by learning about itself and the world' (Gillen & Ghosh, 2007 p33). In this sense GLBT people have sought to engage with this wider trajectory of progress in reaching for equality and freedom suggests we 'activate the differences and save the honour of the name' (Lyotard, 1984 p82). In these words lays the essence of Lyotard's postmodernism, they relate to the narrative of emancipation of the individual through socially guaranteed freedom. As postmodern subjects, we have become aware of and have embraced difference, heterogeneity and have recognised that no narrative can be totalising or representative.

Subsequently the postmodern era was entered with the emergence of a synchronised movement of class and identity politics. This shared social struggle of injustice saw the rise and rapid development of an identifiable GLBT community. As a consequence of postmodernism's 'war on totality' (Lyotard, 1984 p82) against the metanarrative, what followed were dramatic changes in social conditions for the GLBT community as an outcome of activating their differences.

Internationally the American Stonewall riots were a defining event that heralded the beginning of a movement to ensure equal rights for GLBT people (Altman, 1972; Bullough, 1979; Morgain, 2005; Tully, 2000; Willett, 2000; Wolf, 2009; Wotherspoon,

1999). The actions of this group of enraged bar patrons were the culmination of years of police harassment, hate crimes, religious and political disenfranchisement, societal condemnation, and general frustration with living in a homophobic society where gay organisations existed in secret (Altman, 1972; Tully, 2000). Unlike any activity before, these events mobilised and brought together the entire GLBT community toward social, political, and religious actions that still have meaning thirty years following the actual event.

Accordingly the GLBT Liberation movement emerged, which viewed society's treatment of GLBT people not just as a kind of discrimination, but as a deeply rooted form of oppression, intimately intertwined with modernity's capitalism (Willett, 2000). The movement sought to highlight the injustices practiced against GLBT people and aimed to secure political freedom, and to celebrate differences. The movement engaged closely with postmodernity's attack on totality, against the metanarrative, as they sought to increase visibility, redefine gender roles, and question the class notion of the nuclear family.

Drag Subculture - An extension of the GLBT Liberation movement

The point of departure from the modern is best seen with the rise of drag queens in the GLBT community. Drag queens became major constituents in the GLBT Liberation movement, and were more than just female impersonators; they were an extension of the sexual liberation movement (Tully 2000; Willett 2000). The implications of this active participation in the GLBT Liberation movement allowed drag to politicise itself, which encouraged drag to flourish. As a result, drag performances were embraced as vehicles of social commentary; the shows performed were a critical commentary on modernity and played with issues of sexuality, class, race, gender and identity.

In broader terms, drag's presence became ubiquitous with the GLBT community and became a marker of gay cultural identity and community. Drag performances were a form of resistance and solidarity for the GLBT community, undermining and reflecting society's social injustices (Tully, 2000; Willett, 2000). Over time drag performances became a 'tradition' at the Imperial Hotel. Tradition in this sense refers to Eric Hobsbawm's postmodern notion of 'invented traditions' that is a process of formalisation and ritualisation, characterised by referencing the past, by an imposed repetition of set practices (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1993, p4). Nevertheless the 'tradition' of drag became a very effective and powerful postmodern weapon to assert activism, injustice, inequality and gendered stereotypes juxtaposed with humour, which is often seen as a coping mechanism.

Postmodernity: The problems with activating difference

Although the drag scene originated as part of a particular movement in the postmodern notion of activating difference, it also separated individuals that did not subscribe to the heterosexual norm. These differentiating factors included gender, identity politics, and a desire to reclaim sexual identity. This arguably led to a splintering of the community, where there was a difference within difference amongst groups in the GLBT community. Postmodernity can be a source of the celebration of difference but it also lead to fracturing and ultimately an absence of solidarity. The impact of the threat posed by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) pandemic also contested the differences that fractured the community by underscoring a desire for unity and solidarity to fight for another (The

Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies 1995), television, music and fashion (Portwood, 2012; Thomas, 2012). A clear example of the acceptance of the GLBT community in mainstream culture is in how Australia approached internationally portraying national identity at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. During the closing ceremony a Priscilla float was part of the parade of images representing Australian popular culture, and was a crucial acknowledgement of the local GLBT community in Australian culture.

Present day acceptance: A double edged sword

This slow process of cultural acceptance and changing social attitudes has improved and changed the lives of GLBT people. This social acceptance of these 'differences', can be seen by some as a double edged sword. Before explaining this it is important to revisit Malpas (2005) and his complex distinction between modernity and postmodernity. Postmodernism presents a culture that is a continually mutating entity, one in which what counts as modernism or postmodernism will eventually change as culture adapts and assimilates. In this sense by the GLBT community waging a war on totality, and activating their differences, they have in turn experienced and been affected by dramatic changes in social conditions. Although there has been gradual reform and societal acceptance, aspects of the GLBT community are slowly declining as GLBT people become more integrated. There are critical debates amongst individuals in the GLBT community about the need to foster and preserve community afflictions and identity (Thomas, 2012).

In most parts of the Western world, homophobia is in decline. The global trend is for the repeal of anti-gay laws and for greater public understanding and acceptance of sexual difference. Of course not all sexual oppression has been addressed as there is still one crucial element left; sexual oppression still plays a central part in maintaining the kinds of social relationships crucial to capitalism. Remaining inequality maintains the second-class status of lesbian and gay relationships which helps encourage people in accepting heterosexuality as superior and hence our acceptance of capitalist hierarchies (Kuhn, 2005).

Notes on Contributor

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